

# How Should We Treat Our Covenant Children?

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In keeping with the universal practice of the church until the 16th century, Presbyterians believe that “baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized” (WSC # 95). However, the Presbyterian rationale for baptizing their children differs from that of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and many Anglican communions. These groups more or less agree that the thing signified by baptism and the sign itself are inseparably connected—a position known as baptismal regeneration. Presbyterian theology, by contrast, teaches that the saving grace signified by baptism is “not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated” (WCF XXVIII.5). What then is the ground upon which Presbyterians baptize their children? If they do not necessarily believe that all baptized children are “undoubtedly” saved, then why do they place the sign and seal of salvation upon them?

It is at this juncture that Presbyterians appeal to the twin doctrines of the covenant and family solidarity. These two concepts are interrelated and inseparable. In fact, when the covenant concept is first introduced in Scripture, it is revealed in conjunction with the principle of family solidarity: God entered into a covenant with Noah and his household (Gen 6:18; 7:1), and with Abraham and his seed (Gen 17:7-14). Both of these examples are instructive, for they demonstrate that membership in the covenant is no guarantee that one is also a partaker of saving grace. We see this illustrated in both Noah’s children and Abraham’s. God’s sovereign election according to grace produces a distinction and a separation even within the sphere of the covenant: Noah’s son Ham becomes the father of the Canaanites whom Israel would later destroy as part of God’s judgment upon the seed of the serpent (Gen 9:20-27); and Abraham’s son Ishmael is rejected as one not born according to the promise. The apostle Paul takes up this latter example and employs it as a paradigm for the divine selection and reprobation that occurs within the covenant in accordance with the sovereignty of grace: “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (Rom 9:6-7 ESV).

The covenant, then, is the ground of infant baptism. “Infants descending from parents ... professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized” (WLC # 166). God has always dealt with his people covenantally. And since God’s covenants have always included professing believers and their children, in accordance with the principle of family solidarity which continues unchanged under the new covenant, Presbyterians believe that our children are members of the covenant and therefore ought to be baptized on that

ground (Mark 10:13-16; Luke 19:9; John 4:53; Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31-34; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16; 7:14). We do not baptize them because we are infallibly assured that they are elect or regenerate. Nor do we believe that we must at least presume regeneration in order to have a valid, legal ground for baptizing them. This position, known technically as presumptive regeneration, has been suggested by Reformed scholars such as Abraham Kuyper, but it is a minority viewpoint. Rather, it is the command and promise of God to which we make our appeal: God has said that he desires to be our God and the God of our children after us (Gen 17:7; Acts 2:38-39). He has entered into a covenant not only with adults who profess faith and obedience to him, but with their seed as well. Therefore, in reliance upon God's faithfulness, we entrust ourselves and our children to his covenant promises.

But at this point a problem begins to emerge. It is a problem that seems to be the peculiar lot of Presbyterians who base their paedobaptist convictions upon the covenant rather than presumptive regeneration. For if we believe that God's promise of salvation embraces our children and that he desires to be their God as well as ours, and if we also recognize that they are not necessarily elect and that membership in the covenant does not obligate God to grant salvation, then pressing questions begin to arise. How are we to view our children? Should we assume that they are saved or lost? Should we tell them that they are going to hell unless they become converted? Or should we tell them that they are Christ's and that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them (Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14)?

We are no longer inquiring after the legal ground of infant baptism. Here we already assume that the rationale or ground of baptism is the covenant relationship that God has established with professing believers and their children. What we want to know now is this: within the sphere of that covenant relationship, how does God want us to treat our covenant children? There are three possible answers to this question.

### **(1) "Presumed guilty until proven innocent"**

We could view our covenant children as lost until they demonstrate the marks of genuine faith and personal repentance. The first answer has a certain degree of plausibility. If we believe that all, including the children of believers, are born in a lost condition, having been imputed with the guilt of Adam's first sin and having inherited his sinful nature as well, then we must assume that our children are unregenerate until they demonstrate otherwise. Furthermore, it would seem safer to make a negative assumption about their spiritual state. For if we were to make a positive assumption, we might give our children the impression that they can have an infallible assurance of salvation apart from a personal heart-commitment to Jesus Christ. A negative assumption is therefore more prudent, because it will prevent parents from being lulled into a dangerous complacency, thinking that all is well when in fact they are raising tares rather than true wheat.

However wise such sentiments may seem on the surface, we must reject this position as inconsistent with our covenantal starting point. If we really believe that our children are in the covenant, we have no right to make a negative assumption about their salvation—at least not until they have been put out of the covenant through the proper exercise of church discipline. One of the benefits and privileges of membership in the visible church (which is practically identical to the covenant) is that all members in good standing have a right to the judgment of

charity. This judgment is an attitude of “innocent until proven guilty,” and it applies to all members of the church, whether young or old, whether they have made a public profession of faith or are still too young to do so.

Charles Hodge defends this principle by appealing to the apostolic example of addressing the members of various congregations as saints and believers in their epistles:

Agreeably to Scriptural usage such members are called “foederati” [covenanted ones], saints, believers, faithful, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling. The apostles in addressing professing Christians in the use of such terms did not express the judgment of their state in the sight of God. They designated them according to their profession. If they professed to be believers, they were called believers, and were treated as such; unless they gave tangible evidence to the contrary, and in that case they were excommunicated.<sup>1</sup>

Although the apostles knew full well that not all baptized members of their churches were infallibly saved (Rom 11:19-22; 1 Cor 10:1-14; 15:34; Gal 4:11; 2 Tim 3:5; Heb 3:12, etc.), they nevertheless addressed them on the basis of their profession and baptism. Repeatedly, they appeal to the fact that they have been baptized to exhort them to live consistently with what baptism signifies. “How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? ... Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts” (Rom 6:2-12). Paul argues that if we have had the sign and seal of the new birth applied to us, then we are thereby placed under an obligation to walk in the newness of that life, to walk worthy of the calling with which we have been called by baptism (Eph 4:1, 5).

## **(2) “No presumption either way”**

So, then, we should not assume the negative. But does that mean we must assume the positive? Perhaps it is best to make no assumption either way. Simply exhort our covenant children to live up to their baptism by coming to true faith in Christ and living a life consistent with that faith. Since we don’t know if they will do so, we should wait until they make a public profession of faith. At that point, then, we can give them the same judgment of charity we give to all adult members of the church who have made a profession of personal faith and obedience. Besides, if we make the positive assumption, are we not obligated to allow all covenant children to partake of the Lord’s Supper? Doesn’t the fact that Presbyterianism has historically made a distinction between communicant and non-communicant members indicate that we treat them neutrally until such time as they own the covenant for themselves? If we say that our children are not qualified to become communicant members until they make a credible profession of faith and demonstrate the maturity necessary to be able to examine themselves of their ability to partake in a worthy manner (WLC # 177), then are we not in fact holding them at arm’s length from full reception into the blessings of the covenant? If so, then are we not saying that we don’t really believe they are regenerate yet, or at least that we aren’t sure?

As sensible as this approach may seem, it too is incorrect. The above reasoning has an element of truth in it, and we must give due weight to the consideration that we expect our children to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1873), 3.573-74.

personally own the covenant for themselves with a genuine heart-commitment to Christ as their Lord and Savior. After all, we don't believe in paedocommunion. We hold to the standard Presbyterian distinction between communicant and non-communicant membership.

However, it would be wrong to argue that until our children make that step, we must treat them as something less than partakers of the salvation promised in the covenant. For that would be to place the accent on their profession rather than their baptism. It would reduce baptism to an empty sign with no power or efficacy until supplemented by the thing that really counts—one's own voluntary profession of faith. We would be saying that baptism is a useless sign, a vain symbol that has no significance apart from the personal decision or experience of the individual. The point of baptism is that God is the one who objectively calls us and places us in the kingdom of salvation and grace; our subjective faith and obedience is but a response to God's action—a response to which we are continually being called from the moment of our baptism until death. The accent must be placed on the objective action of God in baptism, not on our subjective response to that objective action. Otherwise, the child's public profession of faith becomes a decisionistic conversion experience that makes his previously useless baptism now effective. The process of public profession should rather be seen as an acknowledgment that the child has in fact demonstrated that he or she is responding, and is committing himself to a life of continually responding in faith to the promises of God sealed in baptism.

Furthermore, if we hold our children at arm's length until they make this public profession, we fail to uphold our side of the baptismal commitment. When the church baptizes one of her covenant children she is committing herself to the covenant nurture that they absolutely must receive if they are ever to be expected to own the covenant for themselves. But what does that covenant nurture entail? Is it not that we will continually hold out before our children the promises of God sealed in their baptism and continually call them to the response of faith that those promises demand? Just as Paul exhorted the church at Rome, so we must call our children to walk worthy of the calling with which they have been called, "Do you not know, that all of you who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death and resurrection? Therefore, consider yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin and alive unto God by virtue of union with Christ." But how can we give this exhortation unless we believe that our covenant seed has in fact been baptized into Christ? The imperative is grounded in the indicative. If we are reluctant to proclaim the reality of the indicative, then we have removed the only basis for the imperative.

### **(3) "Presumed innocent until proven guilty"**

We are left with the third option. We ought to view our covenant children as saved until they demonstrate that they have rejected the promises of the covenant by unbelief or conduct incompatible with a credible profession of faith.

Do we not believe that our children are beneficiaries of the promises of the covenant? Do we not believe that God wishes to be their God, and that, therefore, we may and ought to encourage our children to believe that in fact he is their God through Jesus Christ? If we do not, how can we teach our children to pray to their heavenly Father? How else can we graciously and lovingly

discipline them when they disobey unless we tell them that if they are truly sorry for their sins, they have an Advocate with the Father whose blood covers all their disobedience?

We need have no scruples in allowing—even requiring—our children to use the personal language of faith: "My only comfort in life and in death is that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ," to use the wonderfully personal language ("my faithful Savior") of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Our God desires to be their God. He is their God. Therefore, our covenant children may come boldly to the throne of grace, crying, "Abba, Father!" The only obstacle preventing them from approaching God as their Father through Christ is our own unbelief. If we do not believe that God is willing to receive them, and if we treat them as mere on-lookers to the blessings of the covenant, then it should come as no surprise when they fail to present themselves before the church to make profession of their own faith in Christ.

So we do not baptize our children on the ground that we presume regeneration. Rather, we baptize them on the ground that they are members of the covenant by virtue of family solidarity. Nevertheless, the denial of presumptive regeneration as the rationale for baptizing our children does not imply that we should presume that they are unregenerate. Far from it. Our children have a right to all the blessings and benefits of the covenant, one of which is that all members in good standing must be treated and viewed according to their profession. Since by baptism they have the sign and seal of salvation applied to them, we have no right to hold them at arm's length or to be suspicious of their faith until they can pass our artificial tests of the marks of grace. Therefore, we must receive them just as Christ received the little children—as members of Christ's kingdom and as recipients of its highest soteric blessings. "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:14 ESV). In this sense, we should assume that our children are saved.

On the other hand, this is an assumption that can be proven wrong. It is not an infallible assurance that their names are in fact written in the book of life. If our children grow to adulthood and reject the faith they professed in their youth, and if the elders of the church put them out of the church on account of their apostasy, only then do we adopt the opposite assumption. Yet even then, we do not push them out completely, for they may also repent and return the covenant fold by faith. The promise still stands. If they would but turn from their hardness of heart and trust in Christ, he will receive them again into the covenant fold (Rom 11:23).

Those who disagree with the position outlined here are afraid that the "innocent until proven guilty" approach will foster a carnal security in our children, that they will grow up thinking they are saved merely on account of their baptism as infants regardless of the presence or absence of a vital relationship with Christ. But this fear is unwarranted as long as we keep in mind that our children, like all members of the church, are members of a covenant. When we keep this in view, then we see that along with all the privileges and blessings of the covenant there are also certain obligations and requirements. And although those privileges and blessings are granted freely and graciously by God on account of Christ's righteousness alone, not for anything found in us, yet

they can only be received and enjoyed by true faith. The covenant is unconditional in the sense that Christ alone has fulfilled its conditions and merited its blessings for his people. But it is conditional in the sense that the appointed means by which the blessings are received is our whole-hearted response of trusting in Christ alone. Covenantal ingrafting into Christ as signified and sealed in baptism is not unconditional, for we stand by faith (Rom 11:20; John 15:6; Heb 3:12-14).

The danger of fostering a carnal security only arises when the idea is allowed to persist that the blessings are guaranteed even apart from living faith itself. But as long we keep both the objective reality of the blessings and the necessity of our subjective response in balanced perspective, the danger of false security can be avoided. God in his sovereignty will not save all of the church's covenant children—he has not in the past and he probably won't in the future. That is God's prerogative. But we have done our duty if we ourselves respond to the covenant promises in true faith on behalf of our children, and if we continually remind our children of the necessity of their owning the covenant by true faith and heart-felt commitment to Christ. But we have not done our duty, and we ourselves will be demonstrating an evil heart of unbelief, if we hold back one iota of the free grace of the covenant by refusing to embrace them just as their faithful Savior Jesus Christ does.

The following quotes from respected Reformed theologians shows that the view presented here is not unique. Admittedly, the Reformed tradition has not been entirely agreed on these issues, but the broad center of mainstream Reformed thought from Calvin on has held that we must have a positive attitude in our approach to our covenant children. Baptism is no empty sign, but it assures us that he indeed promises to be not only our God but the God of our children after us.

### John Calvin

Now that the end to which the Lord had regard in the institution of baptism has been explained, it is easy to judge in what way we ought to use and receive it. For inasmuch as it is appointed to elevate, nourish, and confirm our faith, we are to receive it as from the hand of its author, being firmly persuaded that it is himself who speaks to us by means of the sign; that it is himself who washes and purifies us, and effaces the remembrance of our faults; that it is himself who makes us the partakers of his death, destroys the kingdom of Satan, subdues the power of concupiscence, no, makes us one with himself, that being clothed with him we may be accounted the children of God. These things, I say, we ought to feel as truly and certainly in our mind as we see our body washed, immersed and surrounded with water. For this analogy or similitude furnishes the surest rule in the sacraments—i.e., that in corporeal things we are to see spiritual, just as if they were actually exhibited to our eye, since the Lord has been pleased to represent them by such figures; not that such graces are included and bound in the sacrament, so as to be conferred by its efficacy, but only that by this badge the Lord declares to us that he is pleased to bestow all these things upon us. Nor does he merely feed our eyes with bare show; he leads us to the actual object, and effectually performs what he figures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 4.15.14.

## John Murray

When we ask the question: why do we baptize infants or upon what ground do we dispense baptism to them? it is sufficient for us to know and to answer that it is the divine institution .... When the church practices this institution and complies with the divine command, no further judgment respecting the secret purpose of God nor respecting God's secret operations in the heart of those baptized is required as the proper ground upon which the ordinance is administered .... It is true that in administering this ordinance we plead the promises which God has attached to faith and obedience, and we rest our faith and hope upon God's faithfulness. But our faith in God's promises would not appear to be placed in its proper relationship to infant baptism if it were conceived of as the ground for baptizing infants. The ground is rather the institution which God has established and revealed, namely, that to the infant seed of believers the sign and seal of the covenant of grace is to be administered. Hence to aver that baptism is dispensed to infants on the ground of presumptive election or presumptive regeneration appears to be without warrant .... In the case of adults, we baptize on the basis of an intelligent and credible profession, not on the basis of a judgment to the effect that the person is regenerate and not even on the basis of the judgment that the person is presumptively regenerate .... Likewise, in regard to infants .... This is not, of course, to say everything regarding the relations of those who are baptized to one another nor regarding the attitude of the church to those baptized. Those making the requisite confession and therefore baptized are to be received as believers, as those in union and communion with Christ, and they are to be treated accordingly. Baptized infants are to be received as the children of God and treated accordingly. But the proper ground of baptism, whether it be that of adults or infants, consists in the divine institution and command.<sup>3</sup>

## Pierre Marcel

The covenant, together with its promises, constitutes the objective and legal basis of infant baptism. Infant baptism is the sign, seal, and pledge of all that these promises imply .... H. Bavinck, the celebrated dogmatician, expresses himself as follows: "This covenant was the solid, biblical, and objective foundation upon which all the Reformers unanimously and without exception rested the legitimacy of infant baptism. They had no other deeper and more solid foundation" .... While recognizing that children of believers are baptized because they are in the covenant and are, as such, heirs of the promises implying a right to justification and to the regenerating and sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, a certain number of Reformed theologians have attempted to add one of the effects of the covenant of grace to the foundation of infant baptism, namely, presumptive regeneration. They have considered that presumptive regeneration could be the ultimate ground of baptism, more so even than the covenant. It must be acknowledged that this attempt has failed. Presumptive regeneration cannot be regarded naturally as the legal ground of infant baptism, for this cannot be anything other than the promises of God contained in the covenant. The ground of baptism must be something objective. One cannot baptize on the basis of a presumption. To the question: "Why can you presume the

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<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 53-56.

regeneration of the children of believers?" one can only reply: "Because they are born of believing parents"; or, in other words, because they are born into the covenant. Besides, Scripture and experience afford proof that not all the children born into the covenant are regenerated to salvation.

*It is obvious that to refuse to consider this presumptive regeneration as the foundation of baptism is not at all the same as saying that it is impossible or unjustifiable to assume that the little children of believers are regenerate ....* In accordance with the indications of the Word of God, we do not wish in any way to restrict the divine liberty which acts in sovereign independence when and as it wills, and which is never confined to means. The promise of the regeneration of the children of the covenant is sufficient for us. It is not for us to define whether this regeneration in view of salvation is found in the elect children before or at the moment of baptism, or sometimes even years afterwards.

The ground of infant baptism is that "the Lord receives amongst His people the children of those to whom He has shown Himself as Savior, and that for the sake of the fathers he accepts their offspring .... The present truth which we must consider at baptism, when it is granted to little children, is that it testifies to their salvation by sealing and confirming the covenant of God upon them" (Institutes IV.xvi.15, 21) .... Calvin and his successors, together with practically all the modern Reformed dogmaticians, affirm very clearly that it is the covenant that is the ground of the baptism of both adults and children.<sup>4</sup>

## Louis Berkhof

Presumptive regeneration naturally cannot be regarded as the legal ground of infant baptism; this can be found only in the covenant promise of God. Moreover, it cannot be the ground in any sense of the word, since the ground of baptism must be something objective .... Naturally, to deny that presumptive regeneration is the ground of infant baptism, is not equivalent to saying that it is entirely unwarranted to assume that infant children of believers are regenerated .... It may be well to quote in this connection the first half of the fourth point of the Conclusions of Utrecht, which were adopted by [the Christian Reformed Church] in 1908. We translate this as follows: "And, finally, as far as the fourth point, that of presumptive regeneration, is concerned, Synod declares that, according to the confession of our Churches, the seed of the covenant must, in virtue of the promise of God, be presumed to be regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until, as they grow up, the contrary appears from their life or doctrine; that it is, however, less correct to say that baptism is administered to the children of believers on the ground of their presumptive regeneration, since the ground of baptism is the command and promise of God; and that further the judgment of charity, with which the Church presumes the seed of the covenant to be regenerated, by no means intends to say that therefore each child is really regenerated, since the Word of God teaches that they are not all Israel that are of Israel, and it is said of Isaac: in him shall thy seed be called (Rom 9:6, 7), so that in preaching it is always necessary to insist on serious self-examination, since only those who shall have believed and have been baptized will be saved."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Charles Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1982), 198-201.

<sup>5</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 639-40.

## Must Covenant Children Have a Conversion Experience?

One final question must be dealt with. It might seem that treating our covenant children as regenerated runs counter to the biblical call to conversion. Isn't it necessary for everyone, covenant children included, to be converted? Doesn't the Bible insistently and repeatedly command "all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30)? We may add verses like Isa 55:6-7; Ezek 33:11; Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 2:38; 3:19, to list only a few of the many verses that use terms for "turning" from sin, "repentance," and so on. Indeed, repentance is said to "lead to life" (Acts 11:18) and "to salvation" (2 Cor 7:10), which suggests that conversion is vital, perhaps even necessary for salvation.

Yet, on the other hand, the Bible also makes clear that covenant children are to be treated as saved, as members of the body of Christ. For example, Paul addresses the children of the church at Ephesus, right alongside the husbands and wives, masters and slaves, as those who can be exhorted to respond to the imperatives of the gospel in light of union with Christ: "Children obey your parents in the Lord" (Eph 6:1).

So which is it? Do covenant children need to have a conversion experience or are they to be treated as those who already enjoy salvation?

The resolution is to make a distinction between regeneration and conversion. Regeneration is God's secret operation, at the subconscious level, by which he gives the elect a new heart that is capable of repenting of sin and exercising faith in Christ.

Conversion, on the other hand, is (as Berkhof pointed out) "that act of God whereby He causes the regenerated sinner, in his conscious life, to turn to Him in repentance and faith .... The principle of the new life implanted in regeneration passes into the conscious life in conversion."<sup>6</sup>

If we accept this distinction between regeneration and conversion, a number of important but often overlooked implications follow.

First, regeneration is prior to conversion, and conversion follows regeneration. Thus, it is possible for a child to be regenerated in the womb, and to experience conversion or the evidence of conversion, namely, conscious repentance and faith, at a later date.

Second, regeneration is absolutely necessary for salvation, but conversion is not. Berkhof writes, perhaps somewhat surprisingly:

The Bible speaks in absolute terms of the necessity of regeneration; not so of the necessity of conversion. It tells us plainly that, 'Except a man be born again (anew, or, from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God,' John 3:3, but does not speak of the need of conversion in the same general way, which allows of no exceptions ... The expressed or implied exhortations to turn about, found in Scripture, come only to those

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 483, 491.

to whom they are addressed and do not necessarily mean that every one must pass through a conscious conversion, in order to be saved.<sup>7</sup>

Why is conversion not spoken of in Scripture as being absolutely necessary like regeneration? Perhaps one reason is because "those who die in infancy must be regenerated, in order to be saved, but cannot very well experience conversion, a conscious turning from sin unto God."<sup>8</sup>

Third, if regeneration is at the subconscious level and then passes into the conscious life in conversion, i.e., in the form of conscious turning from sin and trusting in Christ, then it is best to treat covenant children as regenerated and then to expect that they will experience growing evidence of conversion, that is, repentance and faith, as they mature.

Fourth, regeneration is a one-time, instantaneous, sovereign act of God, whereby the heart is changed from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh, but conversion can be experienced repeatedly throughout life as the fruit of regeneration. For example, Jesus said of Peter, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have *turned again*, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32 ESV). See also the exhortations to the seven churches of Asia (Rev 2:5, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19). Indeed, the Christian life is one of continual repentance and putting death our sinful deeds and desires by the Spirit in union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:11-14; 8:13; Gal 5:24; Col 3:5).

It is unreasonable to expect covenant children to have one definite conversion experience, as is more common among those converted in adulthood. It is more likely that our covenant children will experience a series of critical stages in their Christian growth where their regeneration manifests itself in moments of more or less stronger awareness of their sinfulness, a desire to turn from sin to God, and a sense of coming to Christ in faith. As Berkhof argued, a crisis conversion

can hardly be looked for ... in the lives of those who, like John the Baptist and Timothy, served the Lord from early youth. At the same time, conversion is necessary in the case of all adults in the sense that its elements, namely, repentance and faith must be present in their lives. This means that they must in some form experience the essence of conversion.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the consequence or fruit of regeneration, namely, repentance and faith, must be present. In most circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that our children were regenerated in the womb or in infancy. And we hope to see growing evidence of their regeneration in the form of first signs and further increases of repentance and faith as they get older.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 490-91.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 491.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 491.

## Conclusion

In sum, we should treat all covenant children as regenerated until proven otherwise. If they grow to adulthood without ever making a public profession of faith or if they lack a credible profession of faith, then they should be subject to church discipline and potentially be excommunicated if necessary. But until that happens, we should treat them the same way we treat adult members of the church in good standing, as fellow Christians and members of the household of God. Just as adult members of covenant community could be unregenerate and tares mixed in with the wheat, so with our covenant children. But just as we cannot read the heart but must treat anyone with a credible profession of faith as a fellow believer, so with our covenant children. God has made promises to save us and our covenant children, to convey his grace from one generation to the next in the ordinary use of the means of grace and covenant nurture. Therefore, we should believe those promises, and part of believing them is to treat our children as "in" rather than "out" and from that position of being "in" to nurture them in the faith in the expectation that they will grow up into a mature faith.